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The Influences of Folklore on the Creation of the Mormon Identity

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University of Tennessee

The Influences of Folklore on the Creation of the Mormon
Identity

Hannah LaPrise
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Abstract

This paper focuses on the American Mormon community's creation of their own unique identity. The original identity was fabricated starting at the church's inception under Joseph Smith's leadership, but was truly found its footing in the Mormon migration to Utah, led by Brigham Young. However, much like Latter Day Saints doctrine remains open to receiving new revelation; the Mormon community's folklore is a constantly growing body of works. Understanding this folklore is an integral piece of exactly what makes a Mormon a *Mormon*, as opposed to any different religion that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ. Folklore is capable of working its way around most boundaries created by social hierarchy – rather, it encompasses a community as a whole unit, and thus represents not what separates individuals, but what unites the collective members. A community's folklore is a reflection of the culture's values: what lessons should be taught, what ethics are important, how an individual should interact with his religion on a daily basis, to name just a few examples. Folklore works by weaving the past into the present to construct the very fabric of the Mormon identity. From its inception, the Mormon Church has been faced with persecution. This was the force pushing Mormons to create a solid group identity that would stay strong when facing both discrimination and the contemporary world. While doctrine outlines beliefs, folklore fills in any other necessary information regarding how a Mormon individual is expected to understand their faith and act accordingly within that faith. In the Church of Latter Day Saints, folklore works parallel to doctrine in ensuring the Mormon identity remains strong and consistent over the years. Folklore contextualizes doctrinal beliefs in both Mormon daily life and in Mormonism's greater identity of being a religion deeply steeped in American history and culture.

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The Influences of Folklore on the Creation of the Mormon Identity

From its humble beginnings of a mere six members, the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) today has over fifteen million members across the globe. When skimming through one of the church's many online domains, mormonnewsroom.org, one can find a myriad of facts and figures about how quickly the church is growing – for example, there are six million serving around the world, 83,000 missionaries in the United States alone. With figures like these, it is not hard to believe that the National Council of Churches cites the Mormon Church as the second fastest growing church in the United States.

However, within this same online argument touting the rapid growth of the church, immediately following is a cautionary plea to not be fooled by statistics. Statistics, this official church document insists, do not take into account the complexity the Mormon experience. The church also claims that the strength of the church is not found only in numbers, but in the devotion and commitment of the people making up the congregations. But what exactly is this devotion – what shapes it, what gives it meaning? And why do Mormons make such a strong stance on maintaining a unique identity, in collective solidarity when faced with the rest of the world's population? Understanding a religious identity such as this means delving into not only doctrine, but daily life, stories, and rituals – all the pieces of an individual's experience that gives their life a purpose.

Thus this paper will argue for the role of folklore in shaping the individual's sense of identity, with a specific focus on American Mormonism, from its humble beginnings to the church's present day global influence.

I will illustrate the important role that folklore plays, operating parallel to church doctrine in the Latter Day Saints community. Unlike doctrine, which serves to codify beliefs to which church members are expected to subscribe, folklore is a means of contextualizing beliefs in both daily life and in Mormonism's greater identity as a religion deeply steeped in U.S. history and culture. While doctrine outlines belief, folklore fills in any other necessary information regarding how a Mormon is expected to understand and act within their faith. I will give special attention to how lessons taught through LDS folklore seek to ensure that its unique core identity remains consistent in the face of outside opposition – both struggles with past persecution and current challenges of grappling with the contemporary world.

I have divided this paper into multiple sections in order to organize my argument. The first few sections introduce the various pieces of my argument, starting with the research of Andrea Smith and Robert Orsi, religious studies scholars whose research methods most closely match with my own. After this, I will differentiate Mormon folklore from Mormon doctrine. A brief history of the church's beginnings in America is then provided. After this, I will delve into my main argument: explaining the importance of folklore, and examining common themes in Mormon folk stories. Lastly, to provide a comparison to the Mormon Church's role in America, I examine how Catholicism uses folklore in its understanding of its religion.

Methodology

In conducting my research, I found that the religious scholar whose work I pulled from the most was Andrea Smith, in her book *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances*. Smith focuses most of this book on the religious actions of Native Americans, and also how seemingly opposing groups can unite to reach for a formerly unseen common goal. I found that many of her statements regarding Native American religion can also be applied to the way I analyzed the Mormon faith. Smith sums it up nicely with her quote regarding her goal in researching Native Americans, “Rather than studying Native people so we can learn more about them, I wish to illustrate what it is that Native theorists have to tell us about the world we live in and how to change it,” (Smith 9). My study of Mormon culture is akin to Smith’s goal; while I am searching for a better understanding of the Mormon Church as a whole identity, I am still focusing on how Mormons view the world around them and the unique lens through which they understand American history. By learning how the Mormon Church understands the world (or, for my narrower paper, America) they exist in, we as researchers can gain a broader scope through which to view America. Also, with Mormons having to grapple with the constant onslaught of changes brought on by modernity, we can see how this one group proposes we change the world around us.

Andrea Smith also discusses the roles culture and religion play in relation to each other. In her research of Native Americans joining Evangelical Christian movements, she explained that many white Evangelicals were worried about Natives bringing their traditions with them, or adapting Christianity to fit with their preexisting religious ideas (Smith 82). The threat of syncretism sat sour in Evangelical stomachs. Native worshippers, however, claimed that they were able to separate their culture from their spirituality, thus making it completely acceptable

for them to join Evangelical movements. Smith, however, stands staunchly against this claim, stating that it “is simply not true to either Native culture or spirituality; the two cannot be separated,” (Smith 83). This is because in Native life, spiritual practices are not separate from daily life (Smith 83). I agree with Smith, as shown in my later depiction of Mormon folklore’s place in the Mormon life. I make no attempt to separate folklore from culture, or from spirituality; rather I look for connections that illustrates folklore weaving spirituality, every day life, including seemingly secular parts of life, and culture together. When discussing the church of Latter Day Saints, it is impossible to separate spirituality and culture, and folklore exists in both of these spheres.

However, Smith stresses rearticulation of religious understandings both of the world and of themselves. We must remember that the Mormon community was in a constant state of active resistance to outside persecution. With such violence involved, rearticulation was an unlikely event, especially when the Mormon church was working so hard to establish a unique identity for themselves. Thus I am stressing consistency as opposed to change in the Mormon identity. For this part of my argument, I find support in the research methodology of Robert Orsi. Orsi states that the purpose of a religious studies scholar is to research peoples in times and places vastly different from our own. Orsi holds strong to the idea that a good scholar must first be able to separate oneself from his own underlying hidden moral and political history (Orsi, *Viper and Hearth* 180). This will aid scholars in researching people in times and places different from our own, and understanding how these peoples conceptualize themselves within the roles of worshippers. In the end, we can hope to learn more about human life, culture, and religion (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 178). Orsi maintains that religion and politics have always been hopelessly intertwined throughout history. As the definition of religion has changed over history, the

tweaking of the definitions has often been a means of continuing the domination of one ethnocentric culture over another (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 178). An easy example of this can be seen in the establishment of the Mormon church in America. America was a Christian-dominated society, in which white Protestantism was the source of ethical control against which all other religions were compared. Religions existing outside of mainstream Protestantism, such as Mormonism, fell into the category of the world's religious "madness" (to use Orsi's terminology). As a religious studies scholar attempting to take in a vast history of Mormon folklore and doctrine, I must not neglect to take into account both the political and moral history of the Mormon people, Mormon nation, and the American nation that gave birth to the Church of Latter Day Saints.

Folklore versus Doctrine

When I reference Mormon *doctrine*, as opposed to Mormon *folklore*, I am referring to one of four things. The first is the King James Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The second is the *Book of Mormon*, subtitled "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." *The Book of Mormon* is not meant to replace the Bible as the main piece of scripture, but rather to work in tandem with Bible. Mormons believe the *Book of Mormon* to be a factual historical record of the events of ancient-American tribes. One of these tribes originated from a man named Lehi who fled Jerusalem in 600 BCE and brought his family to America. Upon arrival, growing conflicts led the tribe to fracture into two nations. These nations fought, and eventually one lost and was wiped out. According to the *Book of Mormon*, resurrected Christ came to the Americas and established his church. While living under his teachings, the tribes prospered. As soon as they began to stray, however, war broke out, which resulted in the destruction of one of the tribes. All

of these events were written on golden plates by the American prophet Mormon. He gave the plates to his son Moroni, who buried the plates and later revealed their location to Joseph Smith (<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/book-of-mormon>).

The third piece of doctrine is a work titled *The Pearl of Great Price*. Mormons understand this to be works by Abraham, Moses, and Matthew that Joseph Smith translated. *The Pearl of Great Price* also includes writings by Smith himself (<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/pearl-of-great-price>).

Lastly, the final piece of doctrine in the Mormon Church is the *Doctrines and Covenants* issued by the church President and/or the Quorum of Twelve. These teachings include later revelations granted by God to Joseph Smith and other Church Presidents (<https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament?lang=eng>). Unlike Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Mormons do not believe Jesus Christ to be the seal of all prophecy. Joseph Smith was able to receive revelation from God. The current church president is also able to receive prophecy from God.

Folklore, on the other hand, consists of teachings not explicitly found in church doctrine. We can look to the *Merriam Webster* definition of folklore, which is as follows: “traditional customs, tales, sayings, dances, or art forms preserved among a people,” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folklore>). For my interpretation of Mormon folklore, I am including the customs, tales, songs, etc. that Mormons use to perpetuate their faith. For Mormons, however, these stories are believed to be *true*. Mormon folklore is made up of important lessons or teaching opportunities that, when described as true, help make the Mormon doctrine seem more obvious in its presence in everyday life.

History of the Mormon Identity

From its inception, the Mormon Church has suffered varying degrees of persecution and intolerance from the greater American public. This persecution was a definite force pushing the Mormons to create a solid group identity that encouraged solidarity in the face of such hardships.

The Mormon Church was officially founded by Joseph Smith on May 15, 1829 (Ostling 29). Before beginning the church, Smith had received two supernatural visions. The first came at age 14, when two personages appeared to him in a pillar of light, after Smith prayed for guidance regarding what church to join. These figures informed Smith that he was to join none of the churches already existing for they were already corrupt (Ostling 24). Three years later Smith's second vision came, in which the Angel Moroni informed Smith about the existence of golden plates that held the account of ancient peoples of America (Ostling 24). On September 27, 1827, Smith was allowed to take possession of the plates and worked to translate them into what is now known as the *Book of Mormon* (Ostling 25).

In 1831 the small Church moved out to Ohio. However, this settlement was short-lived, as it was just the start of a long chain of forced relocations for the tiny Mormon congregation (Hill 35). Mormons practiced isolationist practices regarding economics and society, which alienated them from the rest of the American populace (Ostling 35). Mormons were also quick to make enemies by presenting such an extreme dissention from the predominating Calvinist beliefs held by most of American Christians (Hansen 63). They were attacked by mobs in their Ohio home, which eventually pushed them out. After a few stops in-between, they eventually ended up in a town they named Nauvoo, Illinois (Givens 26). Smith hoped for Nauvoo to be a new Zion, but anti-Mormon sentiment was growing here, as well. In Nauvoo, Smith was jailed and later assassinated in his cell (Givens 27). Nauvoo disintegrated, and new Church leader

Brigham Young initiated the great Mormon migration across the Mississippi River. Young was cited as stating, “it was voted unanimously that the church en masse move from the United States, where we have had nothing but persecution from the beginning, and go to a country far to the west where we can serve God without being molested by mob,” (Givens 31). Thus in 1847, Young set out to the Salt Lake Valley of Utah, ready to find a safe haven for Mormons to worship as they desire without the constant fear of persecution and violence directed against them (Givens 34).

With a history this riddled with violence and fear, it is not difficult to see how the Mormons would have developed a strong desire to cling to their identity – solidarity was the only way to survive.

The Importance of Folklore

While it is easy to base one’s understanding of a particular religion on doctrine alone; folklore can and should be elevated to a more central focus in the study of a religion. What places folklore on a separate plane of understanding than that of strictly doctrine is folklore’s ability to tie together multiple disciplines (Wilson 159). Scholars can discuss folklore as literature, as art, as music, as stories, as a means of understanding history, etc. (Wilson 160). The concept of folklore encompasses the artistry of all humans of every social class within a particular culture (Wilson 159). Folklore can be a means of focusing not on what separates individuals, but what the collective group members have in common – what it is that unites people (Wilson 166). A collected body of folklore is a close representation of a culture’s values – the stories do not have to be historically accurate to have a purpose. What matters is that the

stories teach a lesson, explain a set of values, or illustrate a religion's interaction in an individual's daily life, to name just a few examples of folklore's purpose within a society.

In this paper, of course, we are studying why folklore matters specifically in the Mormon culture. In their great migration westward, the church members believed that they were going to make a brand new start in a brand new land (Noble 56). This meant they could abandon any old traditions, and ban any foreign influences on their culture and lore (Noble 57). However, the church of Latter Day Saints was founded at a time of great religious upheaval in America – right after the Second Great Awakening (Hansen 52). The reinvigorated stress on religion led to multiple definitions of the meaning of America. While the majority Protestant ideology of the time influenced much of our later understanding of history, there was also at the same time the competing Mormon group, attempting to write their own American story and definition (Hansen 53). Because of this, we must view the Mormon identity as a whole picture, complete with its identity within American culture. It is true that the Mormons were able to isolate their religious folk stories by breaking away from the popular Calvinist ideology (which was also not nearly as evangelical as the Mormon church) of that time, and resituating the emphasis on an exodus motif. However, the Mormons' quest to create their own identity is a small piece in the bigger picture of America trying to forge its national identity (Hansen 54). Thus American culture is intrinsically tied with the Mormon understanding of their place in America, and in the world.

Just what is a Mormon? A Brief Overview of Some of the Highlights of the Mormon

Lifestyle:

As Terry Givens explains in his book *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America*, Mormons are known for being wholesome and clean-cut. Mormon teens are far less likely to drink or smoke than their non-Mormon peers. Premarital sex is strongly spoken against.

Marriage rates are high, divorce rates are low, and family size is large. Traditional gender roles are encouraged, with the woman raising the children and the man working outside the home.

Mormons are normally politically conservative (Givens xviii).

Common Themes in Mormon Folklore

The emphasis on American culture is just one of the many themes commonly found in Mormon folk stories and songs. Because of their birth and growth in America, much of Mormon lore stems from events in American history. Mormon folklore was also highly influenced by the early church members' journey westward. This accounts for the strong themes of pioneering and pioneer lifestyle. This focus on past exploration days (or from the time of Joseph Smith to around the end of polygamy in 1890) is still maintained in today's church; some church members traditionally reenact events of long-ago church members (Jones 113). Other more recent stories are more pertinent to modern day Mormons, as these tales explain the intimate involvement both God and Satan have in the daily lives of contemporary Mormons (Wilson 306). Often stories like this flourish in missionary settings, with young Mormons telling tales to each other during their two year mission to spread God's word. Lastly, much of Mormon folk legend was taught via song performed at church, public events, and in the home.

Mormon Folklore Taught in Song

Singing was and still is a large part of Mormon worship and daily life. Many of these songs' purposes are to either teach Mormon theology or to celebrate the Mormon understood pioneer history (Fife and Fife 42). However, in delving into the vast collection of "songs of Mormon inspiration" is that not all of the songs now associated with the Mormon church are

necessarily of Mormon origin (Fife and Fife 42). While some songs were definitely penned and performed by a specific Mormon audience, others began their lives as secular songs and were gradually brought into the Mormon repertoire and eventually garnered a folk interpretation of either Latter-Day Saint theology or history (Fife and Fife 42). A good example of this can be found in the “Fourth of July Song,” written by Peter McBride in 1876 (Sayers 45):

My friends I’m going to sing to you about the 4th of July,
 And if you’ll listen till I get through, you’ll either laugh or cry;
 So now pull out your handkerchiefs and prepare to snuffle and weep,
 Or snicker and laugh and hip hurrah, and don’t you go to sleep.

... (some verses omitted for brevity)

Now Uncle Sam is a full-grown man so you better look out Johnnie Bull,
 He can swallow you horns, hide, taller and all and not have a belly half full;
 So fill your glasses full my boys, while the banner floats on high,
 And we’ll drink to the flag and Washington, Uncle Sam and the 4th of July.

The strong loyalty to America so overtly present in this song illustrates the Mormon Church’s strong beliefs about the destiny of America. The church believes that the Second Coming of Christ is destined to take place on American soil (Sayers 48). Such strong ties to America as a nation and location explain why a song such as “Fourth of July Song” would be important to the church of Latter-Day Saints – it reinforces America’s centrality in the church’s future (Sayers 48).

Other American traditions captured in song have been adopted by the Mormon church; for example, songs about pioneers or westward expansion often hold a special place in the hearts of Mormons. One example of this type of song that deals explicitly with Mormon history can be seen in “The Ballad of Crossing the Plains” (Fife and Fife 43):

Oh, I’ll sing you a song, it may be a sad one,
Of troubles and trials since first they begun –
For I left my good parents and kindred and home
Far over the hills and deserts to roam.

... (some verses omitted for brevity)

The next day we left there and started to find,
The famous Great Salt Lake and the tall western pines.
We all got there safely, but the two that were slain,
We laid them to rest in the wild dismal plains.

Now my story is ended, my heart’s filled with pain,
For I’ve learned there is hardship for a young roving swain.
But the lesson I tell you, if you love your home,
Is stay with your parents and never go roam.

While these are two good examples of Mormon folk – retelling of American history and how it relates to them, there are also Mormon songs that teach lessons not necessarily found in

American history or in Mormon doctrine. An example of this can be found in another McBride composition, “The Old Folks Song”:

O, the old folks have come, let us greet them with a smile,
 And from all their dear faces, and from them all sorrow beguile.
 O, the wrinkled and gray, they are friends that we love,
 Through they are now on their way to their home up above.
 But whilst they remain, let us do our part.
 To banish a pain and cheer a sad heart;
 That each silver hair and each wrinkled brow,
 May not have a care, while they meet with us now.

(Refrain)

O, the old folks have come,
 O, the old folks so dear;
 We'll sing our song of welcome
 Now the old folks to cheer.

Two strong Mormon themes can be found in this piece: first, the eternal progression of mankind, also expressed as “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become”; and second is the emphasis on the continuity from one generation to the next (Sayers 59).

Other Mormon songs, such as Eliza R. Snow’s “In Our Lovely Deseret,” serve a dual purpose of both religious and secular nature. While the song does teach the disciplined lifestyle of most Mormons, it also discusses the desire that children be healthy and live long lives (Davidson 276):

That the children may live long,

And be beautiful and strong,
 Tea and coffee and tobacco they despise,
 Drink no liquor, and they eat
 But a very little meat;
 They are seeking to be great and good and wise.

Regardless of the theme of each individual song, Mormon folk singing has a central purpose, which is to reinforce the Mormon identity throughout generational change. Some songs, such as those mainly about historical events, serve to remind Mormons of their belonging to a people set apart from mainstream American culture, a people who has overcome great adversity (Sayers 61). This can remind Mormons today of the struggles their ancestors went through to ensure their right to worship in the oft-persecuted faith of the church of Latter Day Saints. Other songs, such as “The Old Folks Song,” reinforce group solidarity on a more personal, rather than historically-based, level. The song serves as a celebration of the older generation by the younger generation. By enforcing respect for the elders, music such as this is also enforcing the hope that the younger generations will grow up mimicking their elders, thus keeping consistent the unique Mormon identity. Lastly, songs such as “In Our Lovely Deseret” work to reinforce healthy lifestyles along with the Mormon religious discipline, which will ensure young Mormons to grow up into healthy adult Mormons to carry on the church.

Mormon Folklore’s Identification of Good and Evil in Mormon Daily Life

Mormon folksong is not the only means of reinterpreting American history, however. In fact, Mormons see the history and actions of America as pieces of a much greater plan laid out by God. A common world view among Mormons is the understanding that all things and events

can be understood in a spiritual way. This stems from the *Book of Mormon*'s explanation of "the war in Heaven." Once God originally announced his plan to place humans on earth, and that Christ would be the one to redeemer the sinning human, Lucifer was quick to disagree. Satan believed that he, himself, was capable of embodying the role of savior – the only catch being that if Satan was to save mankind, then people would lose their moral agency. This was a great conflict that resulted in Lucifer's expulsion from heaven, and began the pre-mortal war of moral agency versus spiritual tyranny (Givens 217). This belief places Mormons squarely in the middle of a long conflict in which good and evil, in the forms of God and Satan, are actively fighting for control over each individual's soul. Folklore, then, can serve as a means of reminding individuals how remembering the power of these two entities is important in one's daily life. It can also serve as a bridge between what may appear to be the distant past in the scriptures and the current, continued effects religion has on worshipers of today.

This worldview is strengthened by just how young the Mormon Church is, and how small its list of doctrine is (Crapo 467). Mormons look to the King James Bible and the *Book of Mormon* as their main sources of scripture. However, modern Church presidents can still receive revelation from God – they just have not received very much instruction since the founding of the church (Crapo 467). The church staunchly claims that it does not exist to sanction official creed, or to separate the heretical from the orthodox. One good example of this is the lack of seminary-type instruction for Mormon ministers – the church is a body led by volunteers who feel called to teach. This style of governance leaves the individual Mormon to create many of their own religious meanings when faced with the struggles of daily life. While this may seem directly contradictory to the church's claims of ongoing revelation, what one must realize is that the list of actual creeds the Mormon Church touts is relatively small, because the church is still

relatively young – there has been only about a century and half during which to receive new revelations (Crapo 468). Thus the door is wide open for folk beliefs to slip in and play a large role in defining an individual's faith.

The belief in the constant intercession of good and evil in man's life has been strengthened throughout Church history by individuals reading events as signs from God; and these events have been added to the canon of Mormon folklore. Examples of this include: the waters of the Fishing River in Missouri rising to block off Zion's Camp when the Missourian mob was pursuing the early Mormons; quail flying into a Mormon pioneer train when it was in desperate need of food; and the existence of a rare species of rabbit around the site of a Mormon-Indian peace talk, which allowed the Indians to have a large supply of fresh meat, making them more favorable to bargaining with the Mormon settlers (Fife 25).

Perhaps the most famous example of God interceding on Mormon's behalf would be the seagull miracle in Utah. This story is one of the earliest faith-promoting stories taught to Mormon youth (Ostling and Ostling 241). In 1848, an early settlement of Mormons in Utah was plagued by crickets, that threatened to destroy their harvest. The legend goes that upon receiving the settlers' prayers, God sent a multitude of California seagulls to Utah as a means of destroying the crickets and saving the Mormons' food supply (Ostling and Ostling 242). This story clearly illustrates God's willingness to act directly in the lives of his followers, even in modern times.

While God is continually cited as playing a large role in Mormon daily life, Satan and his evil cronies are not without agency. There also exist a multitude of stories describing the powers of evil and how evil can interrupt daily life. Evil spirits have been known to steal household items. They have been blamed as the cause of problems in the operations of the City Creek and Big Cottonwood Canyon sawmills, forcing the owners to close down operations (Fife 28).

The lack of a lengthy Church creed (as compared to Catholic doctrinal beliefs and creeds, for example) gives more agency to the individual in deciding how he or she wishes to understand religion's place in day-to-day life. Thus what one Mormon may understand as direct intercession by God or Satan in his life can be retold countless times until it becomes a chapter in the greater canon of Mormon folk legend. Folk understandings of man's interactions with good and evil fills the gaps left between the end of scripture (as in the dates covered in the *Book of Mormon* and in the Bible) and the lives of each individual Mormon. Folklore maintains the relevance of the church teachings, and the relevance of continually acting out one's beliefs. In the case of good and evil, folklore serves to reassure each Mormon that the events in their lives hold the same struggles and fights for the side of Christ that began long before mankind. This means scripture is not only read, but rather each Mormon worshipper can feel that he or she is living out her piece in the struggle to uphold good.

Concepts of Good and Evil in the Life of a Mormon Missionary

Perhaps the easiest area to see folklore's great influence on Mormon daily life is in that of the life of a Mormon missionary. The church of Latter Day Saints depends on missionary work to promote membership growth (Givens 124). The common expectation of the Mormon Church is that every young man, and woman if they feel so called, will serve a two year mission (Givens 127). This most commonly takes place right after graduating from high school, and before attending college. Mission work is not limited to the borders of the United States; rather, Mormon missions are scattered worldwide (Givens 125).

While out in the field, Mormon missionary culture is heavily influenced by folklore. These stories serve as teaching tools to keep missionaries on the right path, and also as a type of

pressure release, allowing missionaries to live vicariously through the bolder and braver individuals of lore (Bushman 65). As explained previously, one of the main purposes of lore is to tell Mormons that God and Satan are intimately involved in their lives – in the case of missionaries, however, these stories are often tailored more to fit the daily activities of mission work. Instead of the legend of the seagulls, missionaries are more apt to tell and retell stories of past missionaries and explain how the actions of said missionaries affected their work for the Lord (Bushman 65). Folklore can also serve as a way of initiating an elder into the missionary system; the stories shared with a new recruit can be teaching guides helping the fairly green elder understand the importance of his task and also how to navigate the difficult road lying ahead of him, doing God's work. Often these stories seem outrageous, but the set up is simple and meaningful: in the end, the wicked will be punished, and the righteous will be rewarded (Bushman 65).

An example of such a story is as follows:

“Two missionaries were messing around, and they decided to confer the priesthood on a dog which they saw on the street. Before they could complete the ordinance, a bolt of lightning came and struck the dog and the two elders, and it zapped them.”

The moral of this particular story is simple – one is not to take sacred matters lightly, or to mess around with their mission from God.

Other stories focus on the power prayer holds for missionaries in protecting them on their journey. An example folk-legend details the struggles of one particular missionary serving in New York. He was faced with a gang that was threatening to physically harm the serving missionaries. When he and his fellow missionaries ran to their car in order to escape the oncoming gang, the car refused to start. Faced with imminent danger, the missionaries decided

the best course of action was to pray. Immediately after the prayer ended, the car was able to be started and the missionaries escaped. Upon later inspection of the car to determine why it would not start earlier, the missionaries discovered that the car was missing its battery. This story illustrates how the power of prayer, especially given in a time of need, makes anything possible. God is willing to bend the laws of science and physics in order to stop the threat of Satan and evil in one's life (Bushman 65). Stories such as this reassure current missionaries of the importance of their work. They are able to look to the past and see the trials and successes of former missionaries, which gives them courage to face their own struggles.

But why Mormons? A peek into a Catholic identity:

In order to paint a better picture explaining how unique the role of folklore is in Mormon culture, we can compare the Mormon identity to that of American Catholics. Robert Orsi (as previously discussed in the Methodology section) studied a group of Catholic Italian immigrants living in the East River section of New York City in his book *The Madonna of 115TH Street*. Orsi described some of the more fantastic rituals these immigrants ardently practiced, such as the *feste*. During this ceremony, worshippers would parade a large statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel down 115th Street in NYC, celebrating and worshipping St. Mary (Orsi, *Madonna* 59). Catholics understood that sharing their struggles with the Virgin Mary cemented the link between worshippers and the divine (Orsi, *Madonna* 221). The picture of a suffering Christ, for example, displays what man has in common with his god – pain (Orsi, *Madonna* 222). This meant that this particular Catholic identity was one built on a foundation of the intense discipline needed by a devotee (Orsi, *Madonna* 224).

Much like how the Mormon faith is strongly supported by devotional practice within the family unit, these Catholics, too, have a home-centered bond with their deity (Orsi, *Madonna* 225). Also like Mormons, the idea of moral responsibility was one that extended far past the four walls of the church building. Saints were expected to act according to standard, and worshippers were expected to live as proper Catholics in all aspects of their daily lives (Orsi, *Madonna* 226). Just as Mormons understood their God to be directly involved with all aspects of their lives, Catholics understood God and saints as existing within the home, not outside of it or restricted to the church (Orsi, *Madonna* 227)

Catholics, too, have their own extensive folklore. What makes it distinct from Mormon folklore is the subject material emphasized in the stories, and the purpose of storytelling. For example, while a church-sanctioned official form of Mariology existed, many groups of worshippers would practice traditions that differed greatly from church doctrine but matched closely with a long history of European popular tradition (Orsi, *Madonna* 227). Many women worshippers doubted that a male god was capable of understanding the rigors of female life: childbirth, menstruation, the worries that come with rearing children, etc. Also, in the Italian neighborhood on 115th street that Orsi studied, women were leading figures in the community. Worshippers wanted to see their social structure on Earth mirrored in the structure of the divine (Orsi 227). Catholic folklore helped worshippers get to know the holy on an intimate level – even to the point that Mary was sometimes referred to “Mama” (Orsi 227). Even though these stories can be categorized as “folklore,” the stories still center mainly around the actions or characteristics of the divine or the saints.

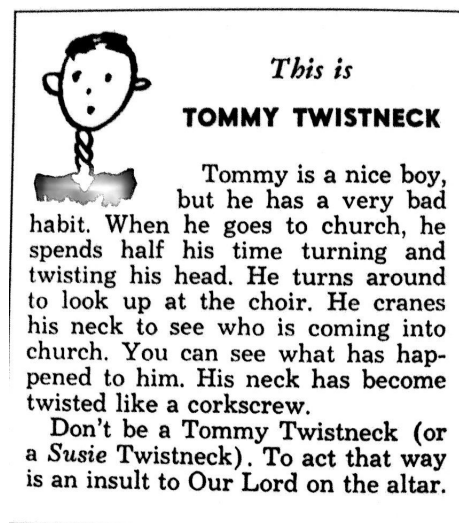
The purpose of Catholic folklore is to forge a stronger and more intimate link between human and the divine. This is actualized in the Catholic devotional practices (Orsi, *Madonna*

187). Devotion could take many forms in the Catholic church, but what separated it from Mormon devotion, for example, was the focus on sacralization of one's efforts. For example, in 1927 the Italians of 115th Street completed building a large bell tower. Later they successfully cleaned the front of their church. After both these events, they were amazed at how much they were able to accomplish, especially during later years when they continued updating their church throughout the Great Depression (Orsi, *Madonna* 187). One of their great folk heroes is a man named Dalia who "knew neither the word 'enough' nor the word 'obstacle'" (Orsi, *Madonna* 187).

What these Catholics are demonstrating is pride in how faithful they are – and one way they prove this faithfulness is through works for the church, which, in turn, are works for the Madonna (Orsi, *Madonna* 187). The hard works help strengthen the bond between god and man. The symbol of the divine, in this case the Madonna, serves as the representation of the community's lengthy tradition and moral code (Orsi, *Madonna* 188). What sets this apart from Mormon tradition, however, is that Mormons lack the sacralization of ritual so often found in the Catholic church. The Mormon church reveres their pioneering ancestors as heroes, but not as saints (Joseph Smith being a special case, as he founded the religion and had visions sent by God). The Catholic church often focuses more on the sacramental pieces of their lore – the ritual, the rites, the saints, etc. While both traditions teach their worshippers how to behave, Catholicism does it through emphasizing the need for devotion to the sacred. Mormon folklore extends a bit further out from the church, including more secular acts that can be understood through a religious lens (pioneering, eating one's vegetables, etc.).

Catholics' efforts to instill these practices and values in their children take a sharp turn from Mormon song and story. The question we must answer for both parties is how do religious

beliefs become material for worshippers, especially children? Orsi claims in his book *Between Heaven and Earth* that religion is the practice of making the invisible visible (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 73). For Catholics, this is done through a set of rituals and carefully constructed children activities. For example, children in their Sunday School classes might better understand the Christmas story from the New Testament by crafting miniature mangers out of Popsicle sticks. As they grow older, Catholic parents have the opportunity to send their children to catechism classes, parochial schools, and to have them participate in special children's rituals (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 77). The main emphasis for Catholics seems to lie in correctly performing one's religion, from ritual enactment to behaving properly in church. An example of the latter, from a Catholic children's handbook, can be seen here (Orsi, *Heaven and Earth* 83):



In this example, we are not seeing a story as would be used by Mormon missionaries. Whereas missionaries might give what they claim is a real life example of what would happen to a “Tommy Twistneck”, Catholics, instead, rely on the lesson alone. This is not a folklore story, repeated among multiple generations or within a variety of social classes. Rather, it is simply a comical lesson. Unlike the Mormon tale of the car miraculously starting without a battery,

Catholics do not believe that craning one's neck in church can literally turn one into a corkscrew neck. It is a hyperbole example to train their children. The car tale, on the other hand, is understood as an actual occurrence of God intervening in human affairs (even though this story is not written in the *Book of Mormon*). In religion's attempts to make the invisible visible, Catholics often rely on performing ritual as a way of connecting with the divine. Mormons, on the other hand, operate as a unique form of Christianity because their doctrine provides the outline of their God, but it is folklore that colors in the picture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, unlike other denominations of Christianity, Mormonism relies heavily on folklore as a means of teaching their youth, ensuring the continuity of the church identity, and placing doctrinal beliefs in an everyday context. When looking to the future, however, the church is faced with a myriad of concerns that the 21st century presents. A church that grew in the face of constant persecution is used to having to adopt a battle-stance of sorts; yet this us-versus-them world view is not very popular in the modern day. Sociologists such as Thomas O'Dea claim the church needs to shift towards a more contemplative and philosophical outlook in order to compete with modern secularity, as the truly violent struggles the church faced were years in the past. However, the church still continues to grow at a rapid rate world wide (Ostling 374). How is the church managing this? As Church President Gordon B. Hinckley states, "...they see in this church an anchor in a world of shifting values. The family is falling apart in America and across the world. We're putting strong emphasis on the family. It's appealing to people....We give [people] an assurance of who they are, sons and daughters of God," (Ostling 375). How are Mormons facing the rigors of modernity? Paternalistic atmospheres that help

continue the retelling of folkloric tales that teach the community a set of shared values. The church continues to provide a multitude of stories that illustrate God's direct involvement in his worshippers' lives (Hill 184). Although the missionaries operating in over 400 missions worldwide carry the church doctrine in their hands within the Bible and the *Book of Mormons*, they hold in their minds the stories that truly flesh out their religion and give it a sense of direct connection to worshippers searching for a firmly entrenched community.

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